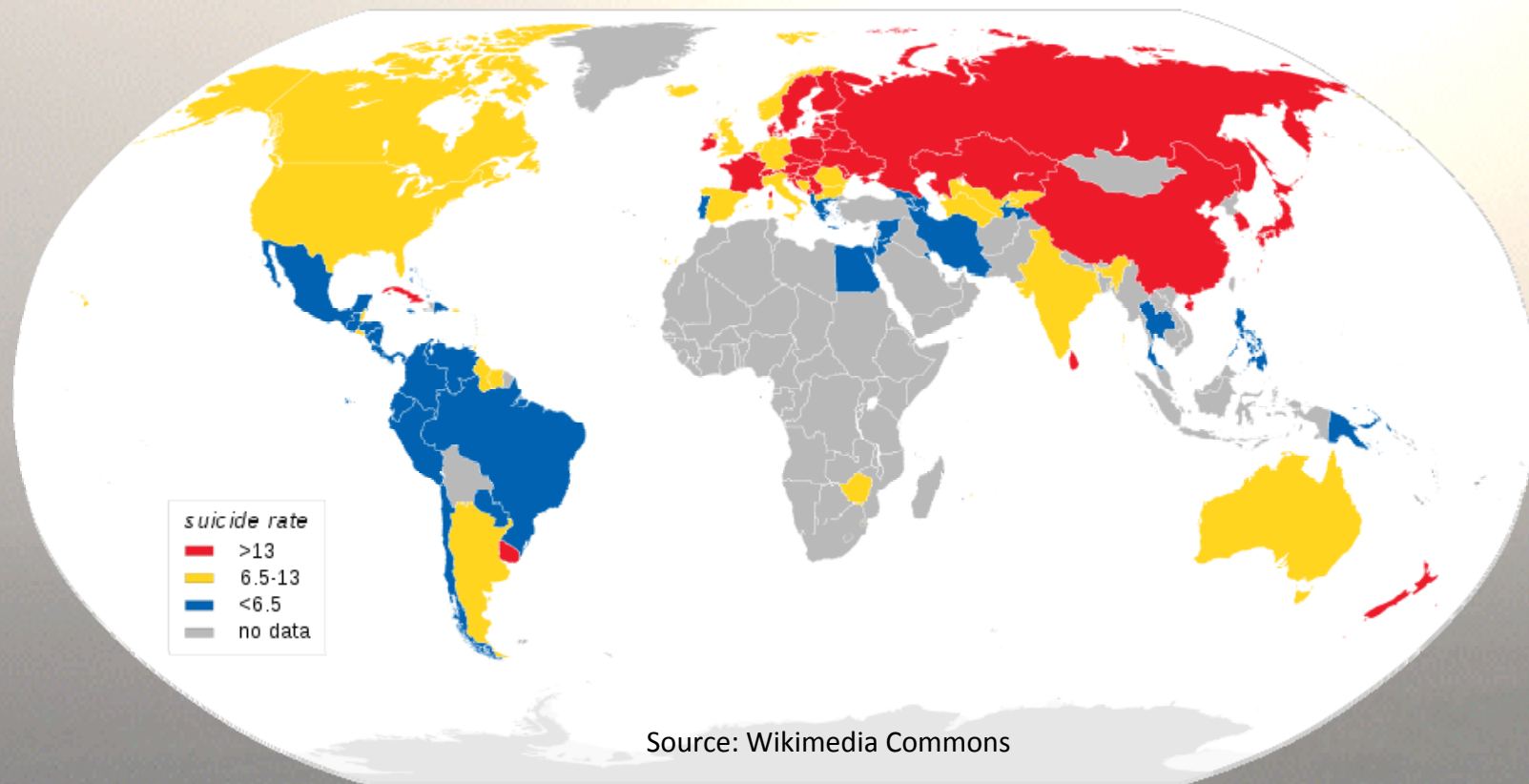


An ethnographic study on the anti-professionalism of self-help groups for family survivors of suicide in Japan

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Background 1: Suicide in Japan

More than 30,000 people commit suicide each year in Japan. The suicide rate in 2009 was extremely high, at 37.8 (Cabinet Office, 2010), and the number of suicides is continuing to increase. In 2006, the Japanese Government introduced the Basic Act on Suicide Countermeasures, and started financially supporting various NPOs for the prevention of suicide (Takeshima et al., 2008).

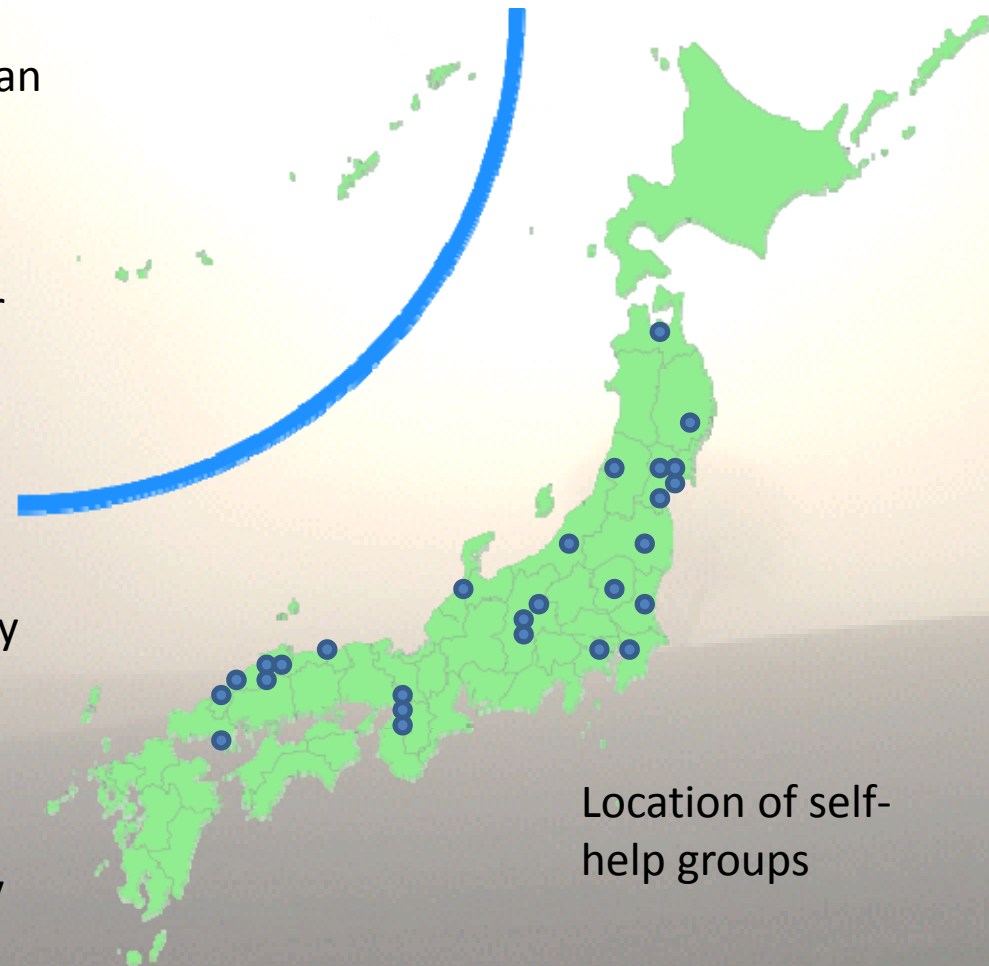


Background 2: Self-help groups

Under the Basic Act on Suicide Countermeasures, over 30 NPOs began to provide professional-led support group services to family survivors of suicide, where many survivors met others with the same experiences for the first time.

However, survivors who were disappointed with those support groups decided to establish peer-led self-help groups that were completely independent of professionals.

Currently, 27 such groups are operating while being loosely linked with a national organisation of family survivors of suicide.



Theoretical background

Peer-led self-help groups vs. professional-led support groups

Peer-led self-help groups and professional-led support groups can be similar in appearance. Professionals and administrators tend to consider professional-led support groups as safer because they provide professional guidance. However, because of this professional guidance, professional-led support groups will not challenge professional frameworks. On the other hand, peer-led self-help groups develop “liberating meaning perspectives” (Borkman, 1999) to empower themselves.



Professional-led
support group



Peer-led self-help group

Natural history of research

Phase 1 [Commencement] 2008 – 2009

In Sept. 2008, two leaders of self-help groups for family survivors of suicide approached me after having read one of my books and deciding I might be able to help them. They spoke about terrible experiences in professionally-led support groups that were financially supported by the Government. They wanted the Government to stop supporting the non-profit organisations providing these support group services.

Phase 2 [Conducting interviews] 2009

The two leaders and I formed a research team to record, through interviews, negative experiences of family survivors of suicide who had used the support groups. The interviewers were the leaders, not me, because of the sensitive topics under discussion.

Phase 3 [Helping elaborate ideology] 2009 – 2010

I was gradually accepted by the members of the self-help groups. I started to talk with many members at their informal meetings, and examine my understanding of their experiences by using member validation.

Aims of the study

This study aims were:

To describe and understand the anti-professionalism of self-help groups for family survivors of suicide.

To empower family survivors of suicide by helping them develop their ideology or “liberating meaning perspectives” (Borkman, 1999).

To examine the roles of the researcher as a critical ethnographer.

Methodology: Critical ethnography

“Critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose. Conventional ethnographers generally speak for their subjects, usually to an audience of other researchers. Critical ethnographers, by contrast, accept an added research task of raising their voice to speak to an audience on behalf of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to the subjects’ voice. . . Critical ethnography is more than just the study of obviously oppressed or socially marginal groups, because researchers judge that all cultural members experience unnecessary repression to some extent. Critical ethnographers use their work to aid emancipatory goals or to negate the repressive influences that lead to unnecessary social domination of all groups. “ (Thomas, 1993, p. 4)

Research participants: Leaders and members who belong to a national association of family survivors of suicide. Around 20 people participated in this research, although with varying levels of involvement.

Research period: From September 2008 until the present.

Data collecting methods: Conversational interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis.

Findings 1: “Grief is ours”

The main theme of their ideology or “liberating meaning perspective” is “Grief is ours.” This means that *their* grief is to be neither removed nor recovered from. The family survivors of suicide reject the concept of recovery and the theory of recovery stages. This rejection leads to their anti-professionalism. The family survivors say, “My only possible way of recovery is to see my dead child alive again!” They decide to live with grief, where their grief is closely connected with their love for the departed. (This attitude agrees with traditional Japanese Buddhist values.)

Another theme of their ideology is de-medicalisation or de-psychiatrisation. They refuse to be treated as a depressive and/or powerless patient with mental health needs. They feel they have health and power. They reject “grief care” provided by psychiatrists and psychologists because they believe no-one but those who have the same experience can understand their grief.

Findings 2: “Getting more radical”

During my involvement with the self-help groups, leaders have shown changes in their thoughts on issues. They are becoming more and more challenging, often saying, “We are getting more radical.” The more supporters they meet, the more confident they are in their feelings and sensitivity. They are also becoming more critical of the Government and medical professionals, both of which are symbols of authority.

After negating the professional-therapeutic model of “recovery stages” and de-psychiatrising their grief and depression, they began to challenge the social role of suicide prevention that society has imposed on the family survivors’ groups. They are realising that emphasising the family role for suicide prevention would lead to blaming themselves because they failed to prevent their loved one’s suicide: “A campaign slogan says, ‘Watch them!’ However, did we not watch them? Some of our members literally watched them for 24 hours but in vain.”

Rather than focusing on suicide prevention, the groups for family survivors of suicide aim to help bereaved families overcome various life problems, including debt problems, and to change society’s often cruel and discriminative attitude toward bereaved families.

Theoretical & Policy Discussion

Anti-professionalism of peer-led self-help groups

Although anti-professionalism was once pointed out as a salient feature of self-help groups (Gartner & Riessman, 1977), little research has been conducted on the anti-professionalism of self-help groups, probably because of researchers' difficulties in accessing anti-professional groups. However, the study of such anti-professionalism will offer various insights into self-help groups and professional services.

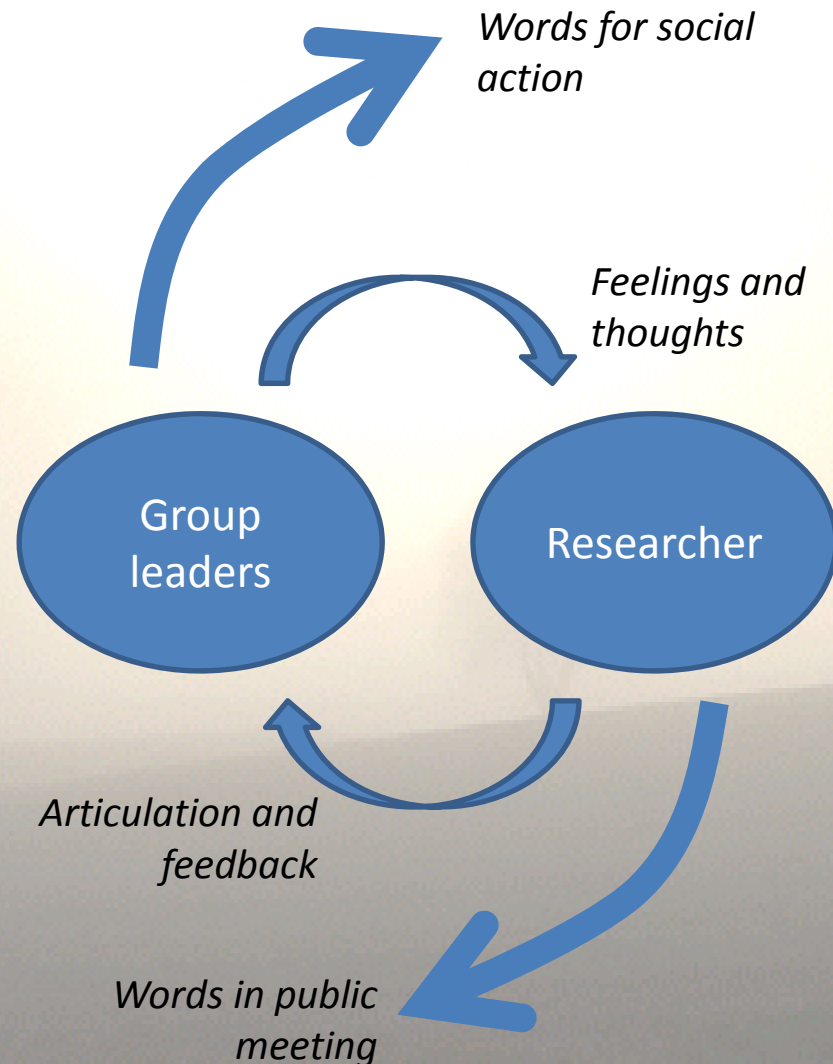
Superiority of professional-led support groups in obtaining societal support

Both professional-led support groups and peer-led self-help groups provide group services to family survivors of suicide. However, while the former easily obtains social acknowledgement because of the sponsor's professional authority, it is not easy for the latter to obtain financial support or social acknowledgement from local government. It is important for scholars to help self-help groups strengthen their "experiential authority" (Borkman, 1999).

Methodological Discussion

Initially, I planned to collect data through interviews that the group leaders would conduct under my supervision. However, we found some interviewees were reluctant to answer, and it proved difficult to obtain rich data.

On the other hand, the leaders several times asked me to speak for them in public meetings, and each time there was a lot of information and opinions exchanged. I found some of their opinions became “our” opinions after I articulated their thoughts (e.g., “Grief is ours.”). This might be a way for self-help groups and a critical ethnographer to cooperate.



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